

Lister Sinclair

I'm Lister Sinclair. This is *Ideas*, with Part 7 of David Cayley's series "The Education Debates." Earlier programs in this series have dealt with the pros and cons of school reform; and, in these discussions, it's simply been taken for granted that mass compulsory schooling is the proper way to educate. Tonight, we change tacks and put the institution itself into question. As American writer Paul Goodman once said, "It doesn't necessarily make sense, just because we do it." This new leg of our journey through education begins with a look back to the 1960s, a time when Goodman and others made radical criticisms of mass education and proposed alternatives. Along with Goodman, you'll hear from Ivan Illich, the author of Deschooling Society, and from John Holt, whose book Teach Your Own became the manifesto of the home schooling movement. "The Education Debates," Part 7, by David Cayley.

David Cayley

There's a passage I've never forgotten in Paul Goodman's Growing Up Absurd, a book he published in 1960. He's writing about the use of the word "like" in the lingo of the beatniks. "Why," he asks, "would someone say they were going to, like, Chicago?" Goodman's answer is that it's a way of hedging your bets in an increasingly artificial, increasingly manipulated world. Chicago might be only a false front, a movie set, a simulation. Better to play it safe and only admit that you're going to something like Chicago.

Paul Goodman lived from 1911 to 1972, mainly in his native New York. He was a poet, a novelist, a playwright, an essayist, a public intellectual and one of the inventors of gestalt therapy. Growing Up Absurd, subtitled Problems of Youth in the Organized System, was his first widely-read book; and it marked his emergence as a kind of Dutch uncle to the youth movements of the sixties. Four years later, he published Compulsory Miseducation. There he wrote, "It is simply a superstition, an official superstition and a mass superstition, that the way to educate the majority of the young is to pen them up in schools during their adolescence and early adulthood." Schooling, he argued, had become nothing more than a technique of socialization and could no longer help most of the young in their search for love, meaning and vocation. Paul Goodman's name has now faded into that middle distance of writers no longer current, not yet classic. But in the middle years of the 1960s, he appeared as a modern Socrates. Socrates, in 'The Apology', compares Athens to a large but lazy horse and himself to a stinging fly. "Every day," he says, "I never cease to settle here, there and everywhere, rousing, persuading and reproving every one of you." So it was with Goodman. For a few years, he gave as many as a hundred public lectures a year, speaking mainly at colleges and universities, but also at conferences, demonstrations, and protest meetings. Everywhere he went he denounced big education and argued for more vivid, more varied, less institutionalized ways of growing up. In the spring of 1965, just after the outbreak of the Free Speech Movement, one of the first great eruptions of the New Left, he lectured at the University of California at Berkeley and he told his listeners that most of them ought not to be enrolled in a university.

Paul Goodman

About 50 per cent of the people here in an academic environment ought not to be here in this academic environment. Not that they can't do the work — because they obviously can do the work or they wouldn't have gotten in — but because this isn't the best way for them to be educated. They really couldn't care less about academic studies. Another 30 per cent, I'm afraid, are at this school just because, since their early childhood, they've never done anything but go to school. And anything else seems utterly daring and dangerous. They've done lessons for five days a week since six years old, and they will do four more years of lessons here. And then they will, God save us, go to graduate school for three more years, and then finally, they will be faced with having to do something

else but lessons. But you see, this is taking us up to 80 per cent. Now then, I'd say there's another 15 per cent who tend to be very good scholars in a examination-passing way and a kind of mastering-the-subject way. They are young people who have their minds set on some kind of professional career which requires a certain amount of know-how and learning certain things in order to get on to the next step. And they do their lessons well. They're well-motivated, et cetera. They obviously ought not to be in a community of scholars. I mean, if it's physics they're interested in, they should be apprenticed directly to General Dynamics, and not have the state or parents pay the apprentice training, which ought to be paid by the ultimate employer, since that's what they're after. Then there are those who really profit by an academic environment. These are not necessarily the brightest. They include some of the brightest, but they include people who would be C or D students, but who really are helped to grow up by a kind of philosophic inquiry and thorough study. And they're bookish and all of that kind of thing. See, they're the kind of people who, in the old days when we didn't have this mass education, formed the solid body of the colleges, surrounded by the elite group who had to go because it was upper class to go. These are the real student types. Now, I'm not making an elite judgment. I don't mean the real student types are the smartest or the best in any way whatever except in this line of being students. There are others who are bright. Take my brother as an instance. He quit school at the seventh grade. He's now a very distinguished architect. If he had had to go to school he would never have become an architect. It would have ruined him. And he's a very bright guy and a great teacher, as a matter of fact. He's now a professor of architecture. But he just was not bookish or scholarly. He would have hated it. He would have turned out to be a juvenile delinquent, and that's for sure, if he had had to go to school.

David Cayley

Paul Goodman's older brother Percival had dropped out of school at age twelve. He found work in a New York architect's office and sought education as it became necessary to advance in his profession. This was exactly how Paul Goodman thought education ought to proceed for those not of a studious temperament. Sending everyone through ten to twenty years of school, he reasoned, has two catastrophic effects. The first is that it corrupts the proper purpose of liberal studies, which have always been understood as a free, non-compulsory pursuit. Our very word for school derives from a Greek word, *schole*, meaning leisure. The second is that it is futile and vastly expensive to try to teach people what they have no motive for learning. In his Berkeley lecture, he illustrated the second point with a story.

Paul Goodman

Let me give you an instance. I have a daughter who is a very bright cookie. Now, she went to a very small college, Bard College. She was in Political Science, which is something she was really passionately concerned with. She's got a great sense of indignation, is a splendid journalist and likes political science in all its aspects. But after two years she had gone through the tiny faculty and they told her, "Suzie, we'll have to change your department because, you know, you're wasting your time here and you either have to leave the school and go elsewhere to a bigger place or change your department." She chose to change. So they put her in Mathematics. They thought that the change would be good. Now, Suzie's a very bright cookie and, lo and behold, she graduated with the mathematics prize. All right. The next year, my boy was beginning at Bronx Science and he asked Suzie to help him with an algebra problem. And she looked at it, and she couldn't do it, and I was struck and said, "But Suzie, you have that beautiful book of logs and sines and cosines in there, leather-bound, that you won. And now you don't seem to know what a quadratic equation is." And she didn't know what a logarithm was. But she said, "Well, that's nothing. I never had any interest

in it, but I like to please, and he was a very nice man, and so he told it to me, and I did the homework, and I gave him back the answers, and, of course, I did very well on the tests, because I always do. But I was resolved from the very first moment that this would go in one ear and out the other, and it has.” And she was perfectly happy. Now, I think that was an insult to the teacher. I mean, what right do you have to waste the man’s time that way? But this is absolutely across the board, this sort of error that people make in thinking that you can force someone to learn what doesn’t really fit his need or his real use. And what does happen is that he is prevented from learning those things which really might fit him. And that’s very sad. See, we have to assume that young people want to learn something. They might not want to learn bookishly, but they might want to learn some other way. Then let them. The more free and available the opportunities become, the more their curiosity is aroused. That is, you don’t have to motivate young people or children. They are motivated. What you have to do is to prevent the situation where you put them in a cage, kill their motivation and then have to restimulate them. And this is the history of the American public school. See, I’ve heard perfectly fine teachers in public schools who have a real progressive attitude, who say, oh, but we make such efforts to stimulate the children. I mean, my God, my little girl — I have a little one — she just doesn’t need to be stimulated. Sometimes a sedative would be in order. And something is very wrong if you have to stimulate a child. And it’s certainly the same thing with a young person. Something is very wrong if by the time they get here they need to be motivated. That means that everything has been done to kill their motivation. Well, the only cure for that is to stop trying to motivate them and to give them freedom of choice. Then the old, innate motivations will begin to come out again.

David Cayley

Goodman believed that it was a waste of time and a prostitution of scholarship to try to educate people before they had been moved to want the education by any deep desire or urgent occasion. He also argued that it was extremely costly, because supplying education prospectively, rather than at need, creates huge costs in planning, administration and physical plant.

One of the justifications for a monolithic system of this kind is the belief that learning proceeds like the construction of a building, beginning from the foundation and then rising, floor by floor. You can’t take Sociology 305 until you’ve had Psych. 206. This objection was put to Goodman by one of the professors he met during his visit to Berkeley, and Goodman took it up in his lecture.

Paul Goodman

He says there are, after all, especially in the advanced sciences, certain studies which have to be taken in order. That is, you have to learn the rudiments and then you learn the more complicated rudiments and then you begin to learn the simpler theories and then you learn the more complicated theories and so forth up to the present-day wisdom which the professor wants to give you. This requires some scheduling. Now, this isn’t true for all subjects, I’m sure he would say, but it certainly might be true for some. I have a feeling this is popular wisdom, but I don’t think there is much evidence to back it up. For instance, a study of the progressive high schools was made in the ‘30s, called the Eight-Year Study. What it did was to take students from high schools which had deviant curricula, that is, curricula which did not prepare for the college boards, and follow them then through the four years of college. And the conclusion of the study — and it was done in all the highest style, with regular schools as controls and so forth and so on — was that the more the high school curriculum deviated from preparing for the college boards, the better after the first year in college the students did in college. That is, the less you taught them the rudiments of the college subjects, the better they learned the college subjects. See? Now, that study has never been contravened, but

nobody wants to pay any attention to it whatever. But further, if we have to decide what prerequisites a person needs to take a course, it becomes out of the question that a syllabus preordained years before the student has ever appeared on the scene could be relevant. The only one who could possibly decide what that student should be taking or have taken in order to understand what he's now to take is the professor seeing him face-to-face. I give an example of another of my children, Mattie. Mattie's at Cornell. He's rather good at astronomy. He likes astronomy. He grinds telescopes and all that. He goes to Cornell and takes the astronomy course as a freshman. The professor likes Mattie. Mattie does very well in the course and the professor says next year take my so-and-so course. No. The advisor will not let him take that because that is not the next course, and in fact, the next course in astronomy is out because it conflicts with something else. He has to drop astronomy. But Professor So-and-So said I could take that course.

No, I don't care what Professor So-and-So says you can take. You can't take that course. And so instead he took psychology. He hates psychology. Now, it's really a very sad thing. And this has obviously happened to many, many people in this room. That is, you're doing something which is valuable. The professor who could judge says, do it, and some darned administration rule interrupts you. So you can't do what obviously fits you. Now, do you realize that if we try to teach a child to talk on this basis, we're first going to teach him the letters and then the syllables, you know, and then he'll be able to learn the words and then we're going to put it together into sentences, that most children would stutter.

David Cayley

Paul Goodman did not deny that learning has an order, but he felt that this order is in the learner as much as in the subject. What will fit this inner order cannot necessarily be predicted or supplied in advance. Rather, it will be filled in at need, as the student goes along. The idea that we learn best when we need to know something, in Goodman's view, not only undermines arguments for a rigid curriculum but also refutes the common opinion that systematic schooling prepares students for the world of work. With decently paid work now scarcer than it was in Goodman's time, this justification is advanced even more forcefully today. Goodman addressed the idea of school as a training institution in a lecture he gave in New York in 1969. His audience this time were the members of the Ethical Culture Society of Queens.

Paul Goodman

Now then, it is said that in a high-technological society there's an enormous amount of abstract learning which has to be taught beforehand. But on this, unfortunately, the empirical evidence seems to be entirely negative. A couple of years ago — 1965 to be exact — American College Testing, the people who put out the College Boards, did a study, done by a man named Hoyt, Donald Hoyt, September 1965, ACT Reports, in case you want to look it up, on the question, was there any correlation between college performance, as measured by grades, and life achievement in the professions as measured by the judgment of one's peers or being in Who's Who. And there is no correlation whatever in any profession whatever, whether medicine, law, business, teaching, architecture, there is no correlation whatever in any profession whatever between college performance and life achievement. Now, these are rather dumb criteria, of course, the judgment of one's peers, et cetera, but what would you do? I mean, how do you do such a study? And when people sell the advisability of college-going in the ads, you know, give to the college of your choice in order that youth can do so-and-so, these are the criteria that they're using. They're saying that otherwise he won't make good. All right. Now then there's a theory of what's called functional literacy, that unless these young people go through high school, they won't know how to use a ruler. And then they won't be able to hold a job of the high school level. Well, some of us have been very

suspicious of this notion and finally Professor Berg, Ivar Berg at Columbia School of Business, has made a series of studies in all kinds of situations like textile factories that hire drop-outs and people with high school diplomas. There are banks in New York, for instance, who hire drop-outs, largely for social do-good reasons, or who hire high school or college performers. Insurance companies often hire drop-outs for the same do-good, you know, racial integration reasons et cetera. There is no correlation whatever between job performance and whether you have a high school diploma or are a drop-out in the judgment of the foreman on the job or in terms of actual promotions on the job. None. No correlation whatever. In other words, the theory that if your kid drops out of high school he won't get anywhere is simply a hoax. If he's black he won't get anywhere, whether he goes to high school or he doesn't go to high school that's true, but it's got nothing to do with that. If he comes from a family that's got money, he will get somewhere, whether he goes to high school or he doesn't go to high school, because he's got connections and he doesn't need to take the first lousy job that's offered, and therefore he gets in at a higher slot. We know all the reasons. But it doesn't make any difference whether he drops out or he doesn't drop out. It's just a hoax.

David Cayley

The research by Ivar Berg that Goodman refers to here was published in 1970 in a book called 'The Great Training Robbery'. So far as I know, it has never been contradicted. Diplomas may be required in order to get more and more jobs, but no one has shown that they are actually necessary to do them. Nevertheless, youngsters are kept in school for longer and longer. Goodman gave a lot of thought to the question of what teenagers would do if they were not in school. He worked hard on a scheme to have city kids placed on farms in Vermont, and he sometimes invited kids from New York to his own country place, an old farm in New Hampshire. Most of his solutions involved taking the considerable resources now invested in schools and making them available so that youngsters could travel, work in non-exploitive apprenticeships or pursue worthwhile projects of their own. Support for public libraries was also central to his thinking. For him, the library, much more than the school, was the model educational institution, and I'll conclude this sketch of his educational philosophy with the reminiscence he shared with his audience in Queens in 1969.

Paul Goodman

I'm of a scholarly type myself. I was a crackerjack student, a test-passer type. But in fact, practically everything which I've ever used in my life I first picked up browsing in the library at age ten, eleven and twelve. I liked exotic books, and I'd go and I'd feel very romantic and adventurous and big shot, if I'd take some strange book from the library and browse through it and then I'd get kind of interested in it. I could understand some of the sentences. So I'd take it home. Well, in this way I learned Greek, Spanish, astronomy, geology, French classical drama, Japanese Noh plays, Tolstoy, William James. I'm just thinking of actual books, you know. I'm thinking of actual books in my mind that I can smell still. Now, when I came to these or related subjects in school later, I came to them with a motivation which I had made for myself. See, I had got into it, got interested in it beforehand and therefore chose things in that direction later. And when I came, even the school method couldn't kill these subjects for me. But it's important to see that I came at it a different way. Now, obviously there are many independent-minded kids of that kind where we would do much better to give them the school money and let them browse in the library. They'd obviously be better off and if they then, after a while, wanted to go to college, they would get much more out of the college. Whereas what we do, by the methods we employ, is to kill any possible interest, even when the interest could exist. Everybody knows that this is the case, but everybody's anxious. Somehow, if we didn't control every step of the way, they would learn nothing, even though the evidence is that, as we do it, they learn nothing. And that whatever they learn, they learn in spite of our methods.

See, people won't trust their intuitions, but they don't also trust empirical evidence of the kind I've been trying to give you. Now, why this happens is an interesting question, interesting sociological question, but that I don't want to go into. But I do want you to think about the fact that it doesn't necessarily make sense just because we do it.

David Cayley

Paul Goodman's argument that big education is an expensive straight-jacket became a common refrain during the 1960s. Another influential exponent of this view was Ivan Illich, the author of Deschooling Society, and a close friend of Goodman's. Illich first began to think about the counter productivity of mass compulsory schooling when he was appointed Vice-Rector of the Catholic University at Ponce in Puerto Rico in 1956. As such, he became a member of the board which governed the island's educational system. He recalled this period in an interview with me in 1988, when he was at Penn State University. He was puzzled, he said, about the effects of compulsory schooling on Puerto Rican society, and he shared his perplexity with Everett Reimer, a sympathetic American then working for the Governor of Puerto Rico.

Ivan Illich

It was thanks to years of conversation with Everett that I came to understand what this educational system of Puerto Rico was doing. First, I had to read my way into the pragmatist and empiricist English tradition of thinkers and philosophers. Then I had to ask myself, what do schools do when I put into parenthesis their claim to educate? And thereby, I was led to a conclusion about the schools in Puerto Rico. Thank God I had the opportunity to ask for data. They had then a machine which was called a computer. It had nothing to do with what you see around now, but it already could gobble up so-called data and organize them. When I looked at the print-outs they gave me, it was quite evident that after ten years of intensive development of the school system in Puerto Rico, which at that moment was the showcase for development, together with Israel, around the whole world, schooling was so arranged that that half of the students who came from the poorer families had a one-in-three chance to finish five years of elementary education which were compulsory. Nobody faced the fact that schooling served, at least in Puerto Rico, to compound the native poverty of that half of children with a new interiorized sense of guilt for not having made it. I therefore came to the conclusion that schools inevitably are a system to produce drop-outs, to produce more drop-outs than successes because since the school is open for 16 years, 18 years, 19 years of schooling, it never closes the door on anybody, there will be a few successes and a majority of failures. I saw that schools really acted as a lottery system in which those who didn't make it didn't just lose what they had paid in, but for life they were stigmatized as inferior.

David Cayley

Illich's discovery that schooling was aggravating inequality made him curious about why this counterproductive effect was being so widely overlooked. He concluded that people's irrational allegiance to schooling, held against the evidence of what it actually does, could only be explained by viewing schooling as a secular ritual.

Ivan Illich

I began to engage in a phenomenology of schooling, and to ask myself, what am I studying? I was not studying, quite definitely, what other people told me this was, namely the most practical arrangement of imparting education or of creating equality because I saw that most of the people were stupefied by this procedure, were actually told that they couldn't learn on their own, became

disabled and crippled and, second, I had evidence that it promoted a new kind of self-inflicted injustice. So I came to the conclusion that this was a mytho-poetic ritual. Max Gluckman, who was my hero at that time, says rituals are forms of behaviour which make those who participate in them blind to the discrepancy which exists between the purpose for which you perform the rain dance and the actual social consequences which the rain dance has. If the rain dance doesn't work, you can blame yourself for having danced it wrongly. Schooling, I increasingly came to see as the ritual of a society committed to progress and development, creating certain myths which are a requirement for a consumer society. For instance, it makes you believe that learning can be quantified, learning can be sliced up into pieces and can become additive, that learning is something for which you need a process within which you acquire it, that in this process you are the consumer and somebody else organizes the production of the thing which you consume and interiorize. This is all basic for being a modern man, for living in the absurdities of the modern world.

David Cayley

Illich's understanding of schooling as a ritual considerably widened the scope of the analysis he first made in Puerto Rico. During the 1960s, he hosted regular seminars on education at the institute he directed in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Paul Goodman was often a part of this conversation. Then, in 1970, Illich published the fruit of his reflections, Deschooling Society. His proposal was bold and direct. Disestablish school, just as liberal societies had once disestablished religion. Make people's schooling or lack of it a private matter and make it illegal to discriminate against them on that basis. The political issue, in other words, was not schooling as such but compulsion and the manifest injustices that result from it.

Ivan Illich

I'm against compulsory schooling. I am not, in the same way, against schools. I know that schools always compound native privilege with new privilege. Only when they become compulsory can they compound lack of native privilege with added self-inflicted discrimination. Schools, which are freely accessible, are a way of organizing certain specific learning tasks which a person proposes to himself. Schools, when they are compulsory, create a dazed population, an unlearned population, a mentally pretentious population as we have never seen before. The last 50 years of intensive improvement of schooling here or in Germany or in France have created television consumers.

David Cayley

When you wrote about this in 1970, you suggested, somewhat in the spirit of the time, that this would change, that it would have to change and that, when it did, it would change quickly.

Ivan Illich

I was wrong. At least in the time frame, I was wrong. I did not believe so many people could be so tolerant of nonsense. Now that I am back in the United States and again have to do here and there, not only at Penn State, with student populations, I sometimes am so sad in the evening that I have difficulties falling asleep because I see at least the college and university system as having become so much like television — a bit of this and a bit of that and some compulsory program which nobody but a planner understands why its components should be connected as they are, creating students who have utterly gotten used to the fact that what they learn they must be taught and nothing which we are taught we must really take seriously. I did not believe that people could remain morally tolerant.

David Cayley

Illich's argument for the disestablishment of education was intended to protect the poor from unfair discrimination and return education to its former status as a liberal, that is to say, a free pursuit. However, even before Deschooling Society was published, he had begun to wonder whether the world was not already on the way to becoming what he would later call "the universal classroom". What this meant, in effect, was that de-schooling could not be accomplished simply by disestablishing schools. Education, he now saw, was no longer restricted to schools. It had become a pervasive and universal myth.

Ivan Illich

I had become blind to the fact that the educational function was already emigrating from school, that increasingly other forms of compulsory learning would be instituted. It would become compulsory, not by law, but by other tricks, making people believe that they are learning something from TV, compel people to attend in-service training in many forms, making people pay huge amounts of money in order to be taught how to prepare better for intercourse, how to be more sensitive, how to know more about the vitamins which they need, how to play games. That, therefore, the idea of acquiring and the compulsion of acquiring an education, not satisfied by schooling would become a wide market in modern societies. This made me understand that my criticism of schooling, on which I wrote exactly this pamphlet, Deschooling Society, might have helped people like yourself to reflect that we are climbing up the wrong tree, but that I should now ask myself how it is that societies get addicted, like to a drug, to education. Then, during the seventies, most of my thinking and reflection, to put it very simply was about the question 'how should I distinguish the acquisition of education from the fact that people have always known some things, many things, men have had many competencies and evidently therefore have learned something. And I came to define education as learning under the assumption of scarcity, learning under the assumption that the means for acquiring something called knowledge are scarce.

David Cayley

This definition of education, learning under the assumption of scarcity, put Illich onto a new terrain. The school, as a way of packaging scarce educational resources, now appeared as a typical institution of a society governed by the assumptions of economics. He would go on to ask how the West became such a society in later books, like Shadow Work and Gender.

David Cayley

What Ivan Illich came to call "the myth of education" also became a concern for the third and final thinker I want to look at tonight: John Holt. Holt was a friend to both Goodman and Illich and a regular participant in Illich's education seminars in Cuernavaca. I recorded the interview you're going to hear in Boston in 1982, three years before his death. Holt began his career as a school teacher and first became widely known with a pair of books that are still read today called How Children Fail and How Children Learn. For a time, he threw himself into attempts at school reform, in hopes of making schools more hospitable to the natural curiosity of children. But eventually his thoughts took a more radical turn and he came to believe that schools are as regimented as they are because most people want it that way. In a book called Escape From Childhood, he argued that the very institution of childhood had turned against children.

John Holt

A great many of the people who make their livings and their careers out of being child specialists

defend their work by saying they're child protectors. And I think they're sincere enough in this. I don't mean to imply any hypocrisy or villainy. The idea that all of these people had in mind was that the adult world's a kind of a cold, harsh, terrible place from which children should be protected. We have here also a kind of sentimentalized notion of children as happy, carefree people without a worry on their minds and no idea of what's going on around them. So we must preserve for them this little Garden of Eden. But the trouble with this is that those adults who feel themselves in the real world and not liking it very much, feeling rather hemmed in and oppressed by it, feel a great deal of resentment about their children not having to face what they face. So having created this space for children as a garden, they then proceed to fill it full of barbed wire and broken bottles and various other kinds of hazard. At the end of which the special world of children is, on the whole, a great deal less attractive than the world of adults from which we were supposedly protecting them. Now, this world is constructed of a mixture of law, custom, institution. School is a large part of it. The State of Indiana in this country has a law, and there are probably many comparable laws, which says that any child under the age of something — I don't know, 16 or so — who is on the streets during school hours and not in the company of an adult can be picked up by the police and taken to a school or some kind of custodial institution until the parents can be found and the child turned over to them. So these child enclosures, these child pens, which started as supposedly a garden have become essentially day prisons. What we're concerned about much more is to protect society from children and the press, our press, is full of news stories about such-and-such a school district cracking down on truancy because they fear, probably with good reason, that a lot of the older children are committing various kinds of crimes during the daytime. So they will say after the police in such-and-such a community — there was one in San Diego, I think, quite recently — have conducted a big sweep and gotten all the children back in school, why, burglaries dropped 12 per cent and car thefts dropped 17 per cent and this kind of statistic. So what we've come up with is the idea, really, that children are kind of a dangerous animal that ought not to be allowed to run around loose, for the protection of the rest of us. A very peculiar turnaround.

David Cayley

The enclosure of children, Holt came to think, also went against the grain of how they learn. Like Goodman, he believed that learning only occurs in pursuit of real purposes, but the school, by its very structure, must supply knowledge before it is desired or required.

John Holt

The idea of schools is you learn this now so that you can do something later. And this works for a few children who are capable of spitting out meaningless information, but it doesn't work for most. I think of a young woman I know, now in her late twenties, who as a child was an absolutely hopeless student. She went to a very good private school, the kind of a place where they don't kick you out, but she was just at the bottom of all of those test scores and, worst of all in arithmetic. Couldn't do the simplest kind of addition and subtraction. After she got out of this school, when she was perhaps 13, 14, she went into a free kind of secondary school where she could do what she wanted. She took up photography. This was real photography. The children took photographs and developed the film and printed and enlarged and all of this sort of stuff. And all of that needs numbers. Now, the position of the schools, which is on the surface plausible enough, is you have to know numbers in order to do photography, so if you haven't learned the numbers first, you can't do the photography. What actually happened and actually always happens is that because she wanted the photography she learned — and, I mean, in a couple of months — the numbers that 6, 8, 10 years of schooling had not been able to teach her.

David Cayley

Holt's sense that real knowledge is always acquired in pursuit of real goals led him to advocate the revival of apprenticeship. The young, he thought, ought to learn in the world rather than apart from it.

John Holt

All of what we now consider the learned professions — law, medicine, architecture, engineering and many branches of science — were once learned by the apprenticeship method. Our greatest city architects, Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, never went to architectural school. There were none. The great bridge-builders of the 19th century didn't go to engineering school. There were none. Everything that we now think has to be learned in a school was at one time learned out of a school in a context of real work. And it seems to me much the best place to learn it. I have long felt this was true, but I was very interested and very much confirmed in my opinion by meeting a young Englishman, just within the last month or so, a brilliant theoretical physicist working on the far frontier of theoretical quantum physics, which is so abstract and crazy that you can just hardly believe it. And he showed me a paper which we're printing in Issue #29 of our magazine Growing Without Schooling, in which he says that he believes that the best way in which a twelve-year-old who is interested in physics can become a physicist is to leapfrog all those intervening years of school and begin to work as an apprentice in a laboratory, in an institute where people are doing the advanced work, go right out to the frontier and work with and among the people who are doing the frontier work.

He thinks if he had such a young apprentice that he could give that apprentice real problems to solve, that the apprentice could solve. As he says, any big problem often breaks down into a lot of little problems and it would not be a long time before this twelve-year-old would, in fact, be useful to me and would more and more begin to think of real work of his own to do. I wouldn't have had the nerve, I think, to propose that the apprenticeship method would work in such a highly, as people say, abstract field as that. But he not only believes that it's true, but he and some friends of his are trying to figure out ways in which they can actually do this. It's worth noting that he said of his own academic training as a physicist — secondary school, university, graduate school all those years — that all he ever learned was theories which, when he finally got out to the frontier, he found nobody believed any more. He spent years learning what was, in fact, wrong. Nothing that he ever learned in his academic training was of any use to him in his work. When I asked him, well, where in your schooling did you begin to encounter the ideas or problems which now lie at the centre of your work, he said to me, "I never did. I picked them up independently, in my independent reading."

David Cayley

John Holt, during the last ten years of his life, became an advocate of home education. The journal he just mentioned, Growing Without Schooling, became a meeting place for families all over North America who were taking their children out of school. The next program in the series will look at the home education movement he helped to establish, but I want to conclude tonight's program with a final reflection from John Holt on the futility of the idea that people can be made better, an idea that lies close to the heart of the myth of education.

John Holt

Many people, and I think this is true on the left, seeing all kinds of social problems, think that school ought to be a place where children are taught about social issues and made to feel indignant about all the injustices of the day, a kind of training ground for political radicals. And they would probably say to me, I guess probably some of them have said, well, if children are just learning at home and just learning the things that are interesting to them and pursuing their own interests and happiness,

how are we going to make a better world, how are we going to deal with the problem of the starving and the oppressed and so forth? How are they going to learn the social virtues of generosity and kindness and compassion and concern and so forth and so on? And it's a good question, I think. And for me, the best answer — I won't say it's a complete answer — but the best answer to this question is in my John L. Sullivan story. As the story goes, when he was Heavyweight Prizefighting Champion of the World, he was in New York City riding a trolley car one afternoon with a friend, standing up, holding onto a strap. The car came to a stop. A young man got on who'd been drinking in a saloon. He was a big man, and he'd had quite a lot to drink. He was feeling pretty belligerent. He pushed and shoved his way up the aisle and as he came past John L. Sullivan he gave him a big shove with his shoulder and shoved him out of the way. John L. clutched at the strap to keep from losing his balance and this young man went back to the back of the car. John L.'s friend had seen this and said to John L. "Are you going to stand for that?" And John L. said, "Oh, I don't know why not." And the friend was furiously indignant. He said, "But, you're the Heavyweight Champion of the World. You don't have to be so damned polite." And John L. said, "The Heavyweight Champion of the World can afford to be polite." Now, I think the social virtues are overflowings. They're surplus. People have enough kindness for others, when they have enough for themselves. Otherwise not. It's perfectly true that some people come out of the experience of school and college with an ideology of social concern, but their ways of working for it are very often self-defeating. They tend to hate and despise their opponents. They don't convert people. They're not, for the most part, effective, and the proof of it we see in the world around us. My very strong feeling is that if children are allowed a growing up which enables them to become adults with a strong sense of their own dignity and competence and worth, they will extend these feelings to include other people.

Lister Sinclair

On *Ideas* tonight you heard Part 7 of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley. John Holt's remarks were taken from "The World of the Child," originally broadcast on *Ideas* in 1983. Ivan Illich was first heard in "Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman," in 1989. Thanks to Taylor Stoeher for the recordings of Paul Goodman. Tomorrow night, a program about home schooling.